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The Time and Temperature Sculpture | Naomi Fry

On the corner of Congress and Preble streets in downtown Portland, Maine, stands a grayish, fourteen-story office building. Known as the Chapman Building when constructed in 1924, it originally served as Maine's first modern indoor shopping arcade. Forty years later it became associated with the performance of another civic function: in 1964, an outsize, blinking red electronic signboard was installed on its roof, giving Portland's residents an omnipresent account of the city's time and temperature, and providing the tower with its new name – the Time and Temperature Building.

A building's primary purpose is, naturally, to accommodate its occupants. But the Time and Temperature Building's entry in the mid-1960's into its additional role as looming weathervane (it still ranks among Portland's tallest buildings) might say less about its location as architectural structure and more about its role as sculptural object: one whose inhabitable spaces serve as mere pedestal to the magnificence that is its signboard; one whose function is to register and compress (in fact, to become) the conditions of its surroundings, while simultaneously informing its spectators of those very conditions.

As sculpture, the Time and Temperature Building is equal parts autonomous and situational: It emphasizes a commitment to something like a changeless metaphysics ("I Am Time and Temperature"); but it also theatricalizes its own function, performing it to an audience ("Observe and feel the time and temperature that surround me, that are always already becoming me"). An abstract, self-sufficient monument, it is also a comically huge thermometer, proclaiming its municipal role in exaggerated strokes. It is this meeting point – between a pure formality, where sculpture is nothing other than intensely itself and for-itself, and that patchier, spottier sphere, where sculpture interrogates its engagement with its environment as well as its viewer – which marks the works in *Corridor at Sea: The Performative Object*. Pam Lins, Garrick Imatani, Halsey

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Rodman and Ohad Meromi are all Time and Temperature artists, concerned as they are with sculpture whose aesthetic autonomy is consistently negotiating with an audience-directed performativity.

Take Pam Lins' *As Far As We Can Go* (2007). With its tallish, jutting outline, it might at first look something like that withholding, high modern monolith of *2001* – a great big silent monument, portable, abstract and inscrutable. But abstraction in Lins' work turns eccentric and comical in the weird juxtapositions made between form and material, and a closer look at the piece lights up the ways in which withholding shifts into holding, not to say touching: that moment at which portability, abstraction and inscrutability are grounded and pushed against by way of an ongoing creative process, which stretches here to encompass the work's spongy, kinetic arrangement.

Lins' freestanding colossus is mostly made out of cheapy Styrofoam and wood. Done up in shades of gray, with the odd hot pink blast bleeding between its folksy, faux-stone blocks, it is displayed on an unconventional pedestal: a small mound of dirt anchoring a dozen or so mushroom patches, left to sprout wetly and unevenly, whichever way they will. This organic drama is witnessed by the additional congregation of boxed and wrapped mushrooms huddling in the corner with a water atomizer, and by a tree stump outfitted with oversized plaster eyes and protruding nose, situated off to one side on a furniture dolly. Rounding up the set is a gaggle of floor-bound smallish mirrors on miniature wooden pedestals of their own, crowding to face the wall at mushroom level.

To be sure, there's much of the madcap, adlib spirit of surrealism here, putting a bunch of disparate things together and seeing what will stick. More specifically, however, *As Far As We Can Go* rehearses the limit case conditions of both sculpture making and sculpture viewing. Its mushroomy outlines will keep getting made and remade over the course of time even if no one touches it, and it will continue to influence and be influenced by its surroundings even if no one comes to see it, since it performs its essential viewability through an arrangement of ever ready, on-hand spectators. The mushrooms can always see how far they've come in the mirrors, or they can just discuss it with Stumpy.

On one level, then, Lins shows us that sculptures are people too. In *Faces in the Trees* (2006), a video screened in the exhibition's central corridor, the artist's drifting

camera traverses a dark wood, accompanied by the twangy strains of Lee Marvin's "Wandrin' Star." The near-blackness occasionally flickers with the sudden suggestion of quasi-human presence: pairs of white, staring googly eyes that Lins has affixed to some of the trees her camera encounters. But despite this anthropomorphism, an enigmatic abstraction still lingers. As in Lins' work more generally, it is exactly at the moment when sculpture hovers on the cusp of explainable representation that its inscrutability reemerges. We have to assume, on good faith if on nothing else, that the trees will be able to see us just as we are able to see them, but we certainly can't be sure. Maybe they can see us; maybe they don't want to; or maybe they just can't. For Lins, sculpture is equal parts autistic and forthcoming. Its circuits might be closed, its meanings private; but in rehearsing the terms of its own insular world, it presents us with a vision of something gorgeously, seductively alive.

Lins' objects could never be considered fetishes, since a fetish, by definition, conceals the process of its making, presenting to the world a smooth surface that is cleansed of both certain past and possible future. The artist's penchant for organic kinetics, conversely, grants her sculpture the feel of an ever changing, always worked upon performance. It is this link, between history, performance and objecthood, which turns even more explicit in Garrick Imatani's *Elliptical Apexes* (2007). Displaying objects that are the residues of his performance on *Corridor at Sea*'s opening night, Imatani's work juxtaposes the austere dialect of modernist forms with the raucous, fleshly poetics of performance art, the world of extreme sports and late 20th century youth culture. Imatani's performance began with the artist lying on the floor of the exhibition space, flanked on both sides by a pristine plywood skateboarding ramp reaching to the ceiling. With a pencil attached to his hand, wearing a kimono-like bathrobe over cargo pants and high-tech Nikes, Imatani dragged himself slowly and with effort, tracing a perfect sphere on the floor, and then reemphasized his body's trajectory with slashes of black tape, creating a geometrical, web-like half-circle. Turning then towards a group of mirrored plywood triangles, he gazed at his reflection, shaving broad swathes of his hair off in a *Taxi Driver*-like moment. Sticking a bright yellow phallus-like floatation device in his pants and slapping a helmet on his head, an increasingly odd-looking Imatani then began

to skate on the ramp, occasionally stumbling, his body the ultimate portable sculpture coasting on the ramp's pedestal.

At this point in the performance Imatani began bringing in participants to enhance his in-process sculpture. His father, a doctor, was called upon to aspirate his knee post-skating; Halsey Rodman, on hand as a spectator, was asked to bring in a ladder to aid in the unhurried hanging of a large red and yellow banner (emblazoned with the words "What Do We Want") from one side of the room to the other. Donning protective glasses and headphones, Imatani then picked up a handsaw and began splitting the skating ramp in half, disappearing behind it as it groaned and shivered as if of its own volition under the stress of the blade. Finally managing to hack open the ramp's hollow carcass, Imatani then drilled the mirrored plywood triangles to each other in oriental fan-like arrangement, forming a perfect circle at their meeting point with the black tape marks already on the floor. The performance drew to a close when Imatani picked up a usable sculpture of a wooden electric guitar and hooked it up to an amp to begin singing an impromptu song, whose baying lyrics were mostly unintelligible (although the words "at least I tried," repeated over and over again, were quite distinct), finishing up by smashing the guitar into the ramp's remains. Amidst the strewn-about rubble, the mirrored triangles remained the only trace of order in what had, over the course of roughly an hour, devolved into chaos.

In his performance, Imatani knowingly referenced the seminal work of others who came before him: Barney's feats of hyper-physical prowess as well as his proclivity for the peculiar-looking; Matta-Clark's building cuts; Acconci's interest in protracted, repetitive actions. But what is so interesting about Imatani's own strategy is his consistent puncturing both of the authority of the artist and the supposedly impenetrable autonomy of the sculpture he creates. Pristine objects that were made before the performance became mucked up, and new objects that were created over the course of the performance (a circle of tape on the floor, locks of hair, a shred of guitar suddenly grafted to the wood of the ramp to make something quite new) carried the traces of the labor that got them to where they are. Imatani's performance is about the messy failure that is inherent to the creative process. It is about how making sculpture takes a really really long time. It is, in other words, about studio practice.

The understanding that practice does not (indeed, should not) make perfect resonates in key ways with Halsey Rodman's work. In *K is Multiplied I* (2004/2007), Rodman presents twelve white plaster busts of his head – created by a dozen of his artist friends – which are displayed on hexagonal pedestals of varying heights. The formalist, brightly colored pedestals sport stubby aluminum poles on which Rodman's disembodied heads are skewered (an overzealous literalizing of the edict: "bring me his head on a stick!" and thus, perhaps, a revision of modernism's vexed love affair with ethnographic primitivism). Bald of pate and open of gaze, the busts turn away from each other, their essential likeness rendering them solitary rather than sociable. Their circular, twelve-sectioned arrangement recalls a clock that keeps its own inscrutable time; forming a neon hued Stonehenge, they are the takers of a metaphysical pulse that only they can hear.

Rodman is asking a conceptual question here: what would happen to the artist, to his head as well as his hand, if his representation were split twelve ways? Would his essence become, proverbially speaking, cheaper by the dozen? Or would it, conversely, multiply into unforeseen realms of plentitude? But Rodman's work is also about how the conceptual, such as it is, gains meaning through the material as well as the sociable. A video that is displayed in the exhibition's corridor (*K is Multiplied II*, 2004) reveals the process of the busts' creation: standing in the middle of a circle of sculptors, Rodman himself plays the role of a clock hand, turning on his own axis at predetermined intervals to provide his artist friends with a perceptual playing field that is as equalized as possible. The video is speeded up both visually and aurally: an electronic soundtrack of bleeps, scratches and whooshes accompanies the depiction of a frenzied crescendo of communal art making. Rodman is not only engaged with the vagaries of individual essence; the video suggests he is just as curious to see what happens when sculpture turns into collective play. Surely, any person who has ever taught art will gape jealously at the good time had by all in the *K is Multiplied* sessions. Some of the Rodman heads are lumpy; some are smooth; some are stubbly and some are melty; they are all, however, "creative" – in the best *joie de vivre* let's-make-art sense of the term.

Rodman is interested in the bedrock material properties of the world, in how the elements that surround us can be taken stock of via sculpture. In this, his work is reminiscent of that by artists such as Fischli and Weiss, for whom art making becomes an

almost scientific practice. A case in point is the small lamp sculpture of a three elongated clay lumps, each marked with the words "The Mist" (*Event in Dense Fog* [*The Pickle Lamp*], 2007). There is a wonderful doubleness to this piece. In aspiring to turn into an abstract quality of the environment that surrounds it, sculpture has no recourse but to perform this desire via clumsy representational means, in this case literally announcing it through a touchingly deluded etching on lumpy gray matter. Despite of this, however, the light bulb at the core of the sculpture that continues to glow – warm, silent, present yet abstract – suggests that sculpture might still be able to capture a fleeting glimpse of that which surrounds us but cannot be seen.

If Rodman is largely interested in physics, Ohad Meromi is rather more engaged with theatrics. For Meromi, sculpture is a stage on which social encounters can be played out and potentially worked through, a way to create usable myths for an ideologically reduced age, and the arrangement of objects he shows in *Corridor at Sea* bears out this desire. Three sets of primary colored bleachers are set up to face a stage-like expanse, left empty in the room's center (Rodman's heads suddenly become involved spectators within this arrangement, waiting mutely but curiously to see what kind of performance might come their way). A group of white pedestals, clustered against one wall, is laden with a colorful bunch of artifacts; another group of sculptural objects is arranged upon two long shelves that are installed high up on the wall; and hanging out casually against a column is an enormous sculpture of an acoustic guitar, almost cubist in its reduced lines. Meromi's pedestaled artifacts are a motley crew: a felt sculpture of a huggable, sad looking ram; a handmade wood tambourine; welded metal and string lace-up sandals; and a blue papier-mâché mask of an eye, to describe just a few. The shelved objects are possibly even stranger: rough edged, spray painted approximations of architectural models gone haywire, and a pair of disembodied checked pants, on a wood frame. What might this odd assortment mean?

Cyclops (2004-2005), a two-part video that Meromi displays in the exhibition's corridor, goes some way towards explaining how these objects came to be. Many of them were actually used (worn, shod, fondled, strummed, inhabited as models) over the course of the videos' making, and the pent up, talismanic aura of their past dramatic function still clings to them. This intimation of mix-and-match usability suggests that the language

of modernism has undergone a mutation in Meromi's work. His sculptures, despite their obvious affinity to that earlier dialect, are created at a moment in which the aesthetic sphere no longer offers the possibility of a universally graspable utopia. And so they try harder – they are too many and too touchable and too crafty and too big for their modernist britches, their hyperactively beautiful materialism stretched to popping over their formalist frame; they seem to suggest that if a guitar were to become the abstract, platonic essence of itself, large enough for as many people as possible to perform on, then a new social space might be achieved. Thus, there is something both sad and hopeful about Meromi's work: sad, because not everyone will be able to strum on his guitar; hopeful, because some will.